

## GUIDES TO UNDERTAKING RESEARCH

### 6.6 Writing Manuscript Abstracts- One of the hardest writing skills

All manuscripts need an abstract or summary, usually 300 words or shorter, and after publication it is the abstract that most interested readers will read first. Journals care a lot about abstracts, not least because they care about citations, and a badly written abstract will repel potential readers who might otherwise cite the work. Authors themselves care a great deal about having an abstract that reflects well on their work. For these and many other reasons abstract writing is an important skill to develop.

The most obvious problem faced by an abstract writer is that it is quite hard to shoehorn a lot of information into 300 words yet keep it coherent and readable. With this in mind, below are some approaches to writing manuscript and conference abstracts.

#### *The general structure*

An abstract is a fully self-contained document, which is to say it can be read without needing to refer to anything else. Its structure may vary according to context but typically includes the following:

- Pre-ambule: context and reason for performing such a study on this topic.
- Introduction: the research question and a brief sentence leading into the body of the work.
- Methods: details of the approach taken
- Results: a summary of the main outcomes.
- Conclusion: an interpretation of the outcomes, and what the study means.

#### *Model abstract*

It may be useful to find an abstract on related work in the same research area as a model or starting point, although no text from it should be copied.

#### *Obey the abstract constraints*

Before going much further it is important to know the abstract word or character limit, as the final version must stick with it. If it is to be submitted online that limit will be enforced brutally by the submission portal. If there are other constraints, note them. One to look out for is whether the structure is mandated, e.g., it prescribes a labelled Introduction, Methods, Results and Conclusion sections. Do what is asked, or risk rejection.

#### *Conference abstracts – particular issues*

It should be noted that conference abstracts seek to summarise a conference presentation that has yet to be composed and finalised. In contrast, manuscript or report abstracts summarise (and form part of) a relatively mature documented body of work. The conference abstract is thus written to appeal to the committees and attendees of a conference that lies some time in the future, sometimes after more work will be completed. Thus, to avoid regret it is crucial that any result reported in the abstract is *already obtained*, done and dusted at the time of submission, and not merely something anticipated to come in future, tempting though it often is to include anticipated data. If possible include some illuminating summary statistics in the abstract.

The following is one fairly common approach to constructing a summary abstract when the abstract length is highly constrained, as it usually is.

#### *Stage 1: starting out*

The first sections to write is the pre-ambule and introduction sentences at the beginning of the abstract, and the conclusion sentence at the end, as they frame the whole thing. A particular effort should be made to make sure they are as clear and simple as possible; in practice these are often the parts that readers go to first, and will recall later. They both parts should comprise concrete and precise statements, with no vague language or

wildly overoptimistic claims. They will get progressively refined later (with the rest of the abstract text) but this is a useful first step.

Note the concluding statement is often an expanded and more precise version of the manuscript (or presentation) title.

### *Stage 2: assembling the pieces.*

Once the pre-amble and conclusions are written, the rest can be done, going backwards from the conclusion. Thus:

- Write out in rough dot point form the study results that clearly buttress the conclusion.
- Do not include anything that does not contribute to the impact, or which cannot be explained well in concise terms.
- Next, list those methods and clinical information needed for the results to make sense. Specific details may be abbreviated e.g., “a systematic review was performed”.
- The introduction may need to be re-crafted so link the pre-amble with the rest of text
- When all is done, quite often a short sentence is added after the conclusion to outline briefly what the conclusions might imply in the clinic.

It does not matter if the abstract is over-size at this stage, the focus is to make sure important material is included and it is properly structured. The abstract will then need to undergo a series gradual and often painful reductions.

### *The first amputations*

The abstract first is examined carefully for significant omissions and for any text that could, on mature reflection, be left out. Any loose phrasing such as “in general it was observed” or “there is a great deal of evidence that” can safely be slashed. The introduction might also be truncated if it is clear that the audience is an informed one. How

much over-size the abstract length is should be determined to see the level of discomfort ahead. It is then best to leave the work to one side for a few days (a few hours at least) so as to then approach it with fresh eyes.

### *Stage 3 – the cycle of text reduction*

When returning to the abstract after a break it will be clear that there are sections that can be cut or revised to shorten. It is often best (where possible) to go through a few rounds of cutting then leaving the job for a day or so before returning to it.

However, as the options narrow it can be necessary to recast long sentences to carefully shave off a few words here, an adjective or stray comment there. As the density increases it really helps to have a strong grasp of the language, so if English is not your native language then get some help. Cycle by cycle the abstract size will reduce as originally prized turns of phrase or nice but bulky explanations are sadly jettisoned.

### *Stage 3 – the unsuspected cruelty of other people*

When the abstract length remains excessive yet you feel unable to do more, it is time to use the cold eyes of an objective colleague or mentor. You may be emotionally attached to your text, but they are not. They will therefore be far less hesitant to suggest deep cuts or restructures. Take the advice.

### *Last stage 4 - discussing with the co-authors.*

When the abstract length is right and the text is in a good state it should be shown (with the rest of the manuscript if it is ready) to the other co-authors for their feedback. If the co-authors are engaged they will suggest new perspectives and highlight issues, though hopefully not too much if the deadline is near. Indeed, it is often useful to advertise the deadline in the emails to the co-authors, so to hold-ups and misunderstandings are avoided.

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